

# Making Mini-Speeches and Editing "Magazines": Two Ways to Develop Productive Language Skills

---

*By Jiashu Wang*

We often find our senior-level students of EFL rather weak in productive language skills. Though they have majored in English for three or four years at the university, have a good foundation in English grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, and have little difficulty comprehending authentic English through listening or reading, a considerable number of our students cannot speak or write fluently in the language. This made us realize with regret that linguistic competence does not necessarily lead to communicative performance, and receptive language skills do not directly result in communicative competence.

Let me describe two activities that we have found helpful in getting our students to productively use the language.

## Making Mini-speeches

Mini-speeches are much more demanding and challenging than oral reports.

*Our approach is as follows:*

1. At the beginning of each class, we invite one student to come to the teacher's platform and give a talk to the whole class. This is arranged in advance so each student can sufficiently prepare. The student will face his/her audience and speak loudly enough so that those sitting in the back rows can hear. It is preferable for the teacher to select some bolder or better students to begin the first round so that others can learn from them and have more time to prepare.
2. A student's mini-speech will last between five to 10 minutes. Students can talk about anything they like, provided that their speeches are interesting, informative, and meaningful. We encourage them to focus on some specific themes, and urge them to pay attention to unity, coherence, and rhetorical devices as well as to pronunciation, intonation, and pauses.
3. We advise our students to talk naturally. If the content of their speech is complicated, they may bring outlines for reference, but not whole drafts to talk from.

We tell them that occasional repetition for self-correction or filling in gaps is normal, while inflexible recitation may harm communication.

4. After each mini-speech, we encourage other students to raise questions or we ask some students to recap the main points. In this way the speaker knows if his/her speech has been effective and will pay more attention to the choice of subject matter, diction, tempo, and ways of expression the next time.

5. During the speech it is better for the teacher to take a seat in the back row as a student. After the speech and the comments made by the other students, the teacher should make his/her own remarks about the content of the speech and the speaker's language and manners-mainly praising the strong points.

Under these conditions, our senior-level students have become more active and original in making their mini-speeches. The wide range of interests shown in their mini-speeches often bring pleasant surprises to the teacher as well as their classmates.

During the academic year, each student can have 10 to 12 chances to give a mini-speech. Although it lasts only for several minutes, students spend several hours or days in preparation, deciding on the subject matter, selecting relevant materials, writing an outline, and having rehearsals. More and more students have learned to speak clearly, logically, confidently, and appealingly. Some even have learned how to make use of the blackboard to write down and explain some key words. Their talents have been brought into full-play.

## **Editing English "Magazines"**

This is a term project in which each senior student of EFL is required to edit one complete "magazine" for the purpose of fostering his/her writing ability. The following are our major principles, approaches, and experiences:

1. Students should make overall plans for the project to ensure a timely completion. Usually they work out time tables, the shortest being three or four weeks in duration while the longest may be as long as two and a half months. Then they start collecting and selecting materials. They may establish their own standards-some thinking the articles should be informative and instructive, others believing they should be light and humorous, or easy to understand and of practical use.

2. All students are required to prepare an introduction or foreword, editor's notes or comments for major articles, and captions for photos or illustrations. They should write 20% of the articles themselves and invite classmates or friends to contribute another 60%. For the remaining 20%, they can make use of selected prepared materials. Finally, they are responsible for giving their "magazines" suitable names. Many students tell us that they really rack their brains in order to create the most meaningful name. One student said that he used the name WINDOW for he hopes that readers can see, through reading his "magazine," how wonderful the world outside the campus is. Another girl student gave her "magazine" the name SUNRISE and explained that it implies youth, energy, and hope.

3. We tell our students that they can edit comprehensive "magazines" including various sections and subjects, or just focus on one subject. We suggest a few for their consideration: i.e., university life, popular science, literature, book reviews, internal and external affairs, sports, music and fine arts, etc. However, their own choices have proven to be of much wider scope and we find many fascinating sections on education, psychology, truth, wisdom, linguistics, nature, wild life, youth, love, friendship, biography, health and nutrition, cooking, fashion, movie stars, funny stories, etc.

4. We encourage our students to make their "magazines" look like real ones in shape and quality. The best way to achieve this is simply to show them some fine examples-some real magazines, but mainly those made by earlier senior-level students. After admiring and comparing, many students set out to work so that in the end they really produce "magazines" of superior quality.

5. Our students are also encouraged to give their suggestions. Some suggested that teachers let them know the project and requirements before the winter vacation so that they can collect or prepare some necessary materials at home, especially photos, pictures, and drawing and painting materials. Some suggested they could form groups according to their general subjects. In each group, everyone's magazine could be considered one issue or one part of a whole, with different names and content under the same general subject matter. They believed that would be more fun, more creative, more challenging, and perhaps more difficult as well; but classmates in the same group could help one another solve problems collectively. Many suggested that all the "magazines" be kept in the class library so that everybody could read everybody else's "magazine." This would enable them to learn something from the others and know the others' opinions about their own "magazines," including weak points or mistakes. All these suggestions have been adopted.

Through the term project, our senior-level students of EFL have achieved fruitful results. For example:

1. They have greatly improved their writing abilities, not only in writing exposition, narration, description, and argumentation for the "magazine" but also in practical writing. Sometimes, when they find articles that are valuable and interesting but too long, they will abridge them or write a precis.

2. The quality of their writings has been noticeably raised. When writing for their own or other's "magazines," they write so enthusiastically and carefully that their teachers happily find that many of them have written deliberate, elaborate, and well balanced articles. This is probably because they are writing what they really want to write, not only for the teachers, but for classmates, friends, and other readers. They want to do their very best and sincerely hope that their readers will appreciate their work.

3. They have been exposed to various writing techniques as they transfer interesting articles from popular books and newspapers to their "magazines." Intelligent copying can often enable the students to acquire the writing habits of good authors in lexis, syntax, rhetorical, devices, euphony, and organization.

4. They have also learned the ABCs of editing, such as how to select meaningful and attractive titles for a magazine, how to select articles, how to improve some contributions, how to write forewords and commentary notes, how to reorganize articles, how to give subject headings and subtitles, how to place articles within the "magazine," and how to utilize photos, color, and different styles of calligraphy to make the magazine attractive.

5. In order to find good articles, students scan through many sources, especially those available in reading rooms and libraries, such as *Reader's Digest*, *Time*, *National Geographic*, *The New Yorker*, *Beijing Review*, etc. Many students claim that this project has made them read more and helped them to read faster.

Last term we sent sixty questionnaires to some senior-level students who had completed the project. In the questionnaire were questions such as these:

- *How much time did it take you to complete your "magazine?"*
- *What were your steps in editing your "magazine?"*
- *Why did you choose the topics you selected for your "magazine?"*
- *What is the significance or meaning of the name of your "magazine?"*
- *What were your standards for the choice of articles for your "magazine?"*
- *What are the sources of the articles, photos, and pictures in your "magazine?"*
- *What do you expect from readers of your "magazine?"*
- *What would you like to do with your "magazines?"*
- *What are your comments on this term project?*
- *What are your suggestions for this term project?*

The feedback we received was very encouraging: 80 percent of them described how they had tried their utmost to create professional-looking "magazines;" 96 percent said they had enjoyed the project; 100 percent emphasized that they had learned a lot.

## Conclusion

After several years of practice and classroom research, we have found that asking students to make mini-speeches and edit English "magazines" is effective in developing the productive language skills of our senior-level students of EFL. They are challenging and attractive projects for our students because they are not only more demanding and competitive, but also closer to real life communication and more relevant to their future careers. Our senior-level students enjoyed these activities because they felt their talents and potential had been brought into full play.

As for teachers of EFL, they find these activities effective in developing their senior-level students' productive language skills and overall ability as contributing adults—which is perhaps the most important objective of higher education. Teachers no longer need to search everywhere for "suitable materials" nor work late into the night preparing teaching plans or lecture notes.

What they need to do is to arouse their students' interests, set requirements, offer guidance, give encouragement, and make comments. Another valuable gain for teachers when employing these teaching activities is that they can learn quite a lot from their students.

**Jiashu Wang** is an associate professor of English language in the Foreign Languages Department of Changsha Tiedao University. He has also served as an interpreter for foreign experts working in Hunan.

## References

- Munby, J. 1978. Communicative syllabus design. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brumfit, C. J. and K. Johnson. 1981. The communicative approach to language teaching. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crystal, D. and D. Davy. 1979. Investigating English style. London: Longman.
- Wang, L. Z. 1990. English language teaching in China. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Li, X. T. 1992. English teaching methodology. Beijing: Higher Education Press.